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ABSTRACT

In a study published in 1987, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson proposed that an abstract sociolinguistic principle guides and constrains a speaker's choice of language, and that this principle explains the politeness phenomenon in conversation. Moreover, central to this principle is the concept of "face," or personal self-image, implying that any given conversation begins with two conflicting "face wants," one negative, i.e., the desire to act unimpeded by others; and the other positive, i.e., the desire to be liked and respected by others. In the resulting "balancing act," the legitimate pursuit of a speaker's face needs often leads him/her to perform linguistic acts that threaten the face needs of others, necessitating the use of various strategies to overcome the problem. A major criticism of this model is its failure to reveal how face-threatening acts and politeness strategies interact sequentially with other areas of extended discourse and fit in with a larger social framework. This criticism is the paper's central concern, and the second and greater part of it illustrates this point through close analysis of a dialogue taken from E. M. Forster's novel, "Howard's End." The analysis is designed to show that verbal acts are only small pieces of larger social actions constructed through the succeeding moves of each participant. Forster's characters, it is suggested, seek continuously to empower themselves through the language they use, and in his dialogue, as in all socially contextualized speech, power is a matter for negotiation, something lost and regained with each shift and turn of the conversation. (LR)

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THE EMPOWERMENT OF DISCOURSE MANAGEMENT

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Brown and Levinson in *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (1987) propose that an abstract sociolinguistic principle guides and constrains a speaker's choice of language in everyday discourse and that this principle explains the use of politeness phenomena in conversation. Central to this sociolinguistic principle is the concept of "face," a dimension of social interaction initially introduced by Goffman (1967) as "the positive social value [self-image] a person effectively claims for himself." In summary, speakers, according to Brown and Levinson, come into any given conversation with two basic, but somewhat conflicting, face wants. The first is the want to be free to act unimpeded by others and to have one's individual rights, possessions, and territories uninfringed upon (called negative face wants); and the second is the want to be respected and liked by other people (positive face wants).

We note that in order to satisfy our own wants we are dependent on the actions of others--we are dependent on others to leave us alone and we are dependent on others to like us. In fact, it is in everyone's best interests to conduct him or herself by taking into account that others have the same wants. In practice, however, this

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balancing act of going after our own goals while taking into account what the other participant wants is no easy task, for the legitimate pursuit of our own face needs often leads us to perform acts that by their very nature threaten the face needs of others. Orders and requests, for example, threaten the hearer's want to be left alone, while acts of criticism, disapproval, and disagreement threaten the hearer's want to be liked and respected. All these linguistic acts--acts which are inherently threatening to the hearer--become the principle unit of analysis in Brown and Levinson's model and are called face-threatening acts (FTAs).

As speakers, we adopt strategies that enable us to manage this complex aspect of our discourse effectively. If we foresee that some act we are about to perform may appear threatening to our hearer, for instance, we can redress it in various ways. We can soften FTAs by making them sound less imposing or by preceding them with polite conventional forms (negative face strategies). Another strategy that we can use is to appeal to our hearer's want for solidarity: we can re-emphasize our friendship and liking for our hearer (called a positive face strategy). However, a strategy that we most often use is the strategy of indirectness (off-record strategy); we may, for example, hint that a threatening act is at stake, and let the hearer decide if this is what we really intended.

Due to its tremendous interdisciplinary appeal, Brown and Levinson's politeness model has been tested in a wide variety of fields, and a number of criticisms have been raised. A major criticism of the model, the one which is of primary concern to this paper, is the model's failure to reveal how face-threatening acts and politeness strategies interact sequentially with other acts in large segments of extended

discourse. Brown and Levinson's model presupposes speech act theory as the framework for analysis in determining face-threatening acts: speaker acts and linguistic strategies are determined at the level of the sentence, without consideration of the utterance's discourse environment. A weakness in the model is that utterances in which no FTAs are found are discarded from the analysis. If we accept that the face-threatening act is an important dimension to capture in an analysis of discourse, the question is how we can characterize it in relation to other things that speakers do with their language in conversation.

Both Goffman (1967) and Durkheim (1915) provide the larger social framework within which Brown and Levinson place their politeness model. Brown and Levinson's sociolinguistic principle effectively articulates a religiously-based social phenomenon, the collective will of society to regulate the behavior of individual members. Individuals, according to Goffman, are motivated in conversation to maintain their own face in order to continually reinforce the symbolic representation of their individual sacredness but are also motivated to mitigate their threatening acts out of respect for the sanctity of the other individual. These rituals of face concern become one of the means by which societies regulate the collective behavior of the members out of protection for the dignity of each individual (Goffman 1967: 44).

This view of social interaction negates a model of politeness which views verbal acts in isolation of the discourse environment. In my work on literary dialogue, I have found that the linguistic utterances of the characters can only be viewed as small pieces of larger social actions that become constructed through the succeeding

moves of each participant. Even when no specific FTAs are employed, the characters in the dialogues I have analyzed employ linguistic strategies that are used to balance expressions of social solidarity with those of social reserve, distance, or social threat, constantly responding to and refining their social context. Inevitably, factors extrinsic to language affect the conversational strategies that the characters select for doing this. The social distance between participants (whether they are strangers, acquaintances, friends, or intimates) influences the choices they make, as does their relative social power (the freedom to impose on another's face wants that derives from such factors as gender, age, culture, wealth or class). Thus, discourse displays complex organizational structure, each succeeding move in the dialogue related to preceding utterances on the basis of this social meaning that gets constructed.

Many scholars have pointed out that literary dialogue is almost never merely a bald transcript of everyday conversation. But as Michael Toolan (1990: 275) remarks: "It is hard to see how we could recognise and respond to the former as a version of the latter" if the two did not share significant structural properties. In the analysis that follows, I rely on this observation as the *a priori* justification for applying Brown and Levinson's model to a passage of literary dialogue with the goal of tracing subtle shifts in the dynamic context in which it occurs.

The passage I have selected for analysis is from E. M. Forster's *Howards End*. The novel is about the friendship formed between the

Schlegel sisters, Margaret and Helen, and the Wilcox family. The Schlegel sisters embody values of the liberal humanist tradition and share the spiritual values of Ruth Wilcox, owner of the house Howards End, which has remained close to the earth for generations. These women recognize a kinship against the values of Henry Wilcox and his children who conceive of a life mainly in terms of the materialistic and progressive values of commerce.

In Chapter 17 of the novel, Margaret Schlegel accepts an invitation to lunch at Simpson's restaurant from Evie Wilcox, who is the daughter of Henry Wilcox and by now the late Ruth Wilcox. Evie's avowed purpose in extending the invitation is to introduce Margaret to her fiance, Percy Cahill, but when Margaret arrives at the restaurant, she finds that they are joined by Evie's father.

Evie and Percy soon " [fall] into a conversation of the . . . type . . . which . . . neither desires nor deserves the attention of others," leaving Margaret and Henry to establish a separate discourse at their end of the table. What we remark in Forster's dialogue is that the two characters don't talk much about anything, but what they do with their language is revealing; their exchanges are significant precisely because they function to communicate implicit social meaning.

Henry's early turns at talk confirm what we have learned from earlier episodes about him--that he regards himself as entitled to counsel and protect unmarried women, Margaret in particular. In the Edwardian society that Forster portrays in this novel, men in general exercise the rights and privileges that depend solely on their gender, and women are by definition inferior. In the opening sequence of dialogue, which I will call Movement I, it becomes clear that speech acts alone do not reveal completely what the characters are intending

to do with their language. The conversational sequences that we identify all reveal strategic choice of language around face concerns, for the two characters go back and forth from one sequence to another using strategies that help them to reassert their own individual wills (and therefore, their power over the other character) as well as reveal their intentions to establish solidarity with their hearer.

Henry, throughout the first movement, asserts his power by taking control of the invitational event. His first words are:

> "I thought I'd get round if I could," said he. "Evie told me of her little plan, so I just slipped in and secured a table. Always secure a table first."

Henry projects himself right away as knowledgeable man of the world and thus rightful director of the affairs of his audience. His turn first reveals simply constative informative acts, but in performing these acts he informs his audience that he has taken charge in tending to their positive face. He follows this with a directive act (FTA) and what looks like a word of advice to his audience. But his utterance is really only pseudo-advice; in expressing what he considers good advice, Henry implicates that he himself has just been wise, because he has just informed his audience that he has followed his own good advice. Henry's first utterances, then, in seeming to tend to his audience' s face, also function to tend to his own need of projecting himself as powerful and mindfully in control of his audience.

After establishing this image of himself, we notice that Henry can now take care of the wants of his hearer; he proceeds next with a positive face strategy, tending to his hearer.

"My goodness, but you look tired!

he says to Margaret.

She responds by asserting her immediate needs:

> "I'm hungry, not tired; I want to eat heaps."
>
> "That's good. What'll you have?"
>
> "Fish pie," said she, with a glance at the menu.
>
> "Fish pie! Fancy coming for fish pie to Simpson's. It's not a bit the thing to go for here."
>
> "Go for something for me, then" said Margaret. . . .
>
> "Saddle of mutton," said he after profound reflection; "and cider to drink."

Henry is quick here to fulfill his role of provider. He responds to Margaret's demands by showing immediate attention to her positive face in "What'll you have?" (even though in Brown and Levinson's model this would be considered an FTA against Margaret, since it is a question). But when Margaret clearly expresses her wants, Henry objects in a disputative act with an FTA of disapproval, repeated three times in different ways. Henry, then is forceful in his admonishment. He reasserts his power role. Margaret's directive act here in response, "Go for something for me, then" rather than being an FTA functions to tend to Henry's positive face. She allows him to play out with his language the role that is important to him. At the lunchtable, Henry is able to exploit his social power, even to the extent of overruling what he views as Margaret's unwise selections from the lunch menu. So we see, then, that utterances perform a variety of face functions. Face threat is certainly on of these functions, but not the only one. An utterance may be face-tending or face-distancing or self-tending, as a few other examples.

In the next sequence of dialogue, Movement II, Henry continues

this strategy with Margaret while Margaret cooperatively seeks agreement with Henry whenever possible. After an interruption in the dialogue by the waiter and the meat carver, for instance, Henry begins the movement by once again directing attention to his role as experienced man of the world:

> "It's a golden rule to tip the carver. Tip everywhere's my motto."
>
> "Perhaps it does make life more human."
>
> "Then the fellows know one again. Especially in the East, if you tip, they remember you from year's end."

Henry again indirectly takes care of establishing his position. In a constative informative act, he expresses a generality about tipping, thus implicating a relation between this golden rule and his own actions. He validates what he has just done, an action that demonstrates to his audience that he, as a man, manages his world with competence and confidence. In addition, Henry lays explicit claim to a breadth of experience in the East.

As we shall see, though, this initially, socially predetermined basis for their relationship is neither entirely stable nor Henry's alone to control. For, even as Margaret and Henry eat their lunch and indulge in talk on a variety of unrelated topics (many of them seemingly trivial), each also attempts to renegotiate the balance of social power in her or his favor, deploying a series of FTAs accompanied by an array of positive, negative, and off-record strategies.

Initially, Margaret acquiesces in Henry's boorish behavior even where she clearly disagrees with his pronouncements, but when he is distracted by the need to make "enquiries about cheese," we sense her

preparing to assert herself in Movement III.

> "Next time," she said to Mr. Wilcox, "you shall come to lunch with me at Mr Eustace Miles's."
>
> "With pleasure."
>
> "No, you'd hate it," she said, pushing her glass towards him for more cider. It's all proteids and body-buildings, and people come up to you and beg your pardon, but you have such a beautiful aura."

In this brief exchange, Margaret displays a formidable arsenal of conversational weaponry. Some of her techniques are apparent even without detailed linguistic analysis. For example, she knows from previous encounters with the Wilcox family that adopting the spiritual avant garde as a subject for discussion will put Henry at a disadvantage. But she also opts to initiate this new topic by extending an invitation. As we have seen, this gesture represents a mild imposition on Henry's negative face since for him to accept will entail his surrendering a small measure of his independence. Significantly, Margaret compounds her imposition by ignoring the opportunity to redress her FTA. She rejects a wide range of relatively gracious conventional forms for invitations (Would you come to lunch? or You could come to lunch with me) in favor of the directive "You shall come to lunch." Indeed, her use of the modal auxiliary <u>shall</u> strongly emphasizes the obligation that her proposal will impose.

Henry politely accepts both her invitation and the imposition it entails. But when he does so, Margaret promptly reverses direction on him. After all, however accurate her perception that "you'd hate it" may be, uttering those words in this context has the practical effect of withdrawing the invitation just when Henry has accepted it, blatantly

threatening Henry's positive face by making him look foolish (of course, in a humorous way). Not content with this, Margaret presses her advantage by moving from the mention of the restaurant into a detailed discussion of auras and astral planes, concepts that she knows Henry will probably not recognize.

"Never heard of an aura? . . . . Nor of an astral plane?

She ridicules his ignorance. She finally unleashes an off-record (but unmistakable) attack on his positive face, again in the form of a constative informative act. To Henry's suggestion that he may perhaps have no aura, she responds:

> "You're bound to have one, but it may be such a terrible color that no one dares mention it."

Henry ignores this remark. He begins his own counterattack in Movement IV (dialogue punctuated, significantly, by a brief discussion of what cheese Margaret should order in which he once again magisterially overrides her initial selection). In this sequence, now Henry's turn in this growing round of matches, he defies her three times to disavow her beliefs in the supernatural.

The first of Henry's challenges takes the overall form of question, a form that in itself would threaten Margaret's negative face:

> "Tell me, though, Miss Schlegel, do you really believe in the supernatural and all that?"

He prefaces the question by demanding an answer (*Tell me*) and implies by his use of *really* and *and all that* his own skeptical views, thus establishing a significant distance between his position and hers. When Margaret attempts to answer his question with a non-committal reply, he blatantly interrupts her. Henry then presses a

third time for a definitive response:

> "So you couldn't give me your word that you don't hold with astral bodies and all the rest of it?"

This time, Margaret's response to Henry's persistence betrays rising impatience:

> "I could, " said Margaret. [. . .] "Indeed, I will."

She initially accepts the modal auxiliary *couldn't* that Henry himself introduced in his probing question. But she quickly substitutes for it the more assertive *will*, a choice that enables her to repair some of the recent damage to her positive face. For by employing *will*, she makes clear that she is not merely indicating to Henry which of his variants accurately reflects her beliefs; rather, she is exercising voluntary control over what she will commit to (at least in matters of greater significance than choosing from the menu).

In terms of face relations, Margaret and Henry's discourse to this point may be compared to two tactical maneuvers on a battlefield where Henry initially held the socially ceded "high ground." Through aggressive management of the discussion of the supernatural, as we saw, Margaret succeeded in driving him from that position. But Henry then resorted to a stubborn frontal assault and made some headway, though his attack finally bogs down in an inconclusive exchange of accusations in which Margaret gets the last word:

> "But why do you want all this settled?" [asked Margaret]
>
> "I don't know."
>
> "Now, Mr Wilcox, you do know."

In the final movement of the dialogue, both participants have resorted to outright assaults on the other's positive face and the social order within which the conversation began lies in tatters. They

proceed to launch into a discussion of the proper way to speak to people of the working class. Margaret censures the concept of a mode of discourse specifically tailored to "the lower classes," but she is already far beyond that point when Henry interrupts her in mid-sentence for the second time during this luncheon:

> "Lower classes," interrupted Mr Wilcox, as it were thrusting his hand into her speech. Well, you do admit that there are rich and poor. That's something."

Margaret is dumbfounded ("Margaret could not reply") both by the obviousness of Henry's point and by the aggressiveness of his conversational affront to her negative and positive face--aggressiveness captured in Forster's simile for that speech act ("as it were thrusting his hand into her speech"). But Henry presses forward.

> "You do admit that, if wealth was divided up equally, in a few years there would be rich and poor again just the same. The hard-working man would come to the top, the wastrel sink to the bottom."
>
> "Everyone admits that."
>
> "Your socialists don't."

[admit it], he alleges, openly challenging ground between them, which draws from Margaret the taut--and equally face-threatening--rejoinder:

> "My socialists do. Yours mayn't; but I strongly suspect yours of being not socialists but ninepins. [. . .] I can' t imagine any living creature who would bowl over quite so easily."

In a final, futile attempt to patch things up, Henry falls back on a supremely ironic rationalization: Forster tells us that Henry "would have resented this response had she not been a woman. But women may say anything--it was one of his holiest beliefs." The irony lies, of

course, in the fact that such a broad principle of discourse management would assign to women a priori the power to threaten others' face with impunity, while all the evidence in the novel--not least Henry's own behavior in the conversation we have examined--demonstrates precisely the opposite.

In many important respects, readers of this passage from *Howards End* treat the dialogue it contains as if it were spontaneous conversation. As we have seen, Brown and Levinson's model helps us to appreciate some of the subtleties that this may involve. In particular, their attention to face concerns clarifies the fact that much more is at stake here than astral planes or what Socialists may or may not admit. For Forster's characters are seeking continuously to empower themselves through the language they use and to modify the status that society has assigned them to better suit their aspirations. In Forster's dialogue, in short, as in all socially contextualized speech, power is not a given; it is something that must be continually negotiated for, something that is lost and regained with each shift and turn of the conversation.

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